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ABSTRACT

The cognitivist view of composition suggests that if students are supplied with a set of writing strategies, they will learn to think in more complex and powerful ways, observing their own ideas and writing from another person's viewpoint. On the other hand, some social critics argue that composition teachers need to help their students enter into a new sort of discourse--one that "invents the university...to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (Bartholomae). In her book, "Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing," Linda Flower offers two examples of student writing--the first one termed egocentric and writer-based and the other firm and authoritative. The second example, advanced as better from a reader or professor's viewpoint, in fact shows the writer being socialized and appropriated by the academy. Flower's use of the word "egocentric" for the first example is dismissive, implying that the writer has failed to master the rudiments of ordinary adult discourse, when the real problem is how to enter into a discourse whose constraints and phrasings are unfamiliar to her. Flower's reader-based prose is really another name for a privileged form of discourse: hierarchical in structure, organized around concepts rather than events, and whose transitions and conclusions are made strongly explicit. What is needed instead is a way of talking about writing that does not turn into yet another language of exclusion but rather allows students to connect their discourses to others'. (NKA)

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EGOCENTRISM AND DIFFERENCE

by Joseph Harris, Temple University

A paper presented to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Atlanta, Georgia, March 1987.

We have grown used to linking thinking and writing. Good writing rests upon strong thinking, that much has always seemed clear, and this has led many of us to suppose the opposite: that bad writing must be in some way a sign of faulty reasoning. And so, borrowing from the work of Jean Piaget, some theorists have argued that many of the problems faced by struggling writers stem from their inability to decenter in their thinking, to look at their ideas and writing from the viewpoint of another.[1] Such a cognitivist view suggests, in effect, that many of our students cannot reason abstractly, that they are stuck instead in an early and egocentric stage of thinking. Thus the programs for teaching offered by such theorists usually involve supplying students with a set of writing strategies or heuristics which, it is hoped, will prompt them to think in ways that are more complex and powerful.

This cognitivist view has recently come under fire from critics who believe that our students lack not an ability to reason but a sense of how to use the conventions that shape

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1. See, for instance, Bradford, Flower, Hays, Lees and Lunsford.

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academic writing.[2] Our task as teachers, then, such social critics argue, is not to show our students how to think (since they already know how), but to help them enter into what is (for them) a new sort of discourse--to begin, as David Bartholomae has put it, to "invent the university . . . . to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (134).

What I'd like to do here is to look at some of the practical consequences of this theoretical dispute. In particular, I want to look at a bit of student prose that has been labelled as egocentric, writer-based, and to ask what else we imply by calling it this.

The passage comes from Linda Flower's textbook, Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing. Flower is, of course, the leading cognitive theorist in our field, and this text marks her attempt to translate the ideas of that theory into workable advice for writers. As such, it is a useful and straightforward statement of the kinds of writing that cognitive theory actually values and encourages.

In Problem-Solving Strategies, and indeed throughout much of her research, Flower argues that poor writers generally fail to

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2. See, for instance, Bartholomae, Bizzell, Coles and Walls, and Kogen.

structure their prose around the needs and interests of a reader. Instead they tend to focus their writing on themselves, to organize their prose not so much around their ideas as on how they came to think them. What such writers need most, then, is a set of strategies for making their work more reader-based (163-70, see also "Writer-Based Prose" 20-26).

Such a move from egocentric to reader-based prose is mirrored by a shift from narrative to essay form. Flower warns against that kind of writing in which we must "watch the writer's mind at work and follow him through the process of thinking out his conclusions" (169). Academic readers are impatient for the point, she says, and will interpret such narratives of a writer's thinking as confused or evasive (169). Make sure your ideas are way out front, then, she suggests, cue your readers early on to the gist of what you're saying (172-77). What this amounts to, in practice, is more advice about those warhorses of composition: Thesis Statements and Explicit Transistions. Here, for instance, is a passage that Flower describes as writer-based, egocentric:

> In Great Expectations, Pip is introduced as a very likeable young boy. Although he steals, he does it because he is both innocent and good-hearted. Later, when he goes to London, one no longer feels this same sort of identification with Pip. He becomes too proud to associate with his old friends, cutting ties with Joe and Biddy because of his false pride. And yet one is made to feel that Pip is still an innocent in some important way. When he dreams about Estella, one can see how all his unrealistic, romantic illusions blind him to the way the world really works (170).

And this is its revision into reader-based prose:

> In Great Expectations, Pip changes from a good-hearted boy into a selfish young man, yet he always remains an innocent who never really understands how the world works. Although as a child Pip actually steals something, he does it because he has a gullible, kind-hearted sort of innocence. As a young man in London his crime seems worse when he cuts his old friends, Joe and Biddy, because of false pride. And yet, as his dreams about Estella show, Pip is still an innocent, a person caught up in unrealistic romantic illusions he can't see through (171).

The first draft pretty much retells the writer's ongoing response to the novel. It is structured around what she felt and thought as she worked her way through Great Expectations, and it gives an honest account of both her own uncertainty as a reader, and, implicitly, the prowess of Dickens in creating and exploiting the ambiguous character of Pip.

In her second draft the writer drops this narrative structuring for a more hierarchical one--leading off with a Thesis Statement ("Pip changes . . . yet remains an innocent") that sets an impressively vague and sententious tone, and devoting the rest of the paragraph to a set of particulars that appear to back up that (rather vacuous) opening claim. The voice throughout is sure, firm, authoritative--Academic with a capital A. There is little sense, as there was in the first draft, that this writer ever wavered in her view of Pip--whose essential character now seems to have been clear to her from the very start of her reading.

Flower argues that this second draft is better "from a professor or other reader's point-of-view . . . because it clearly shows what the writer learned from the novel" (171). I wish I could argue more with what such a claim suggests about how and why professors read student writing--but we probably do read in the role of an examiner too much of the time, and even then far too quickly and superficially. Even still, advising our students to write Engfish, theme prose, simply because it works, because it is what many of their professors will expect, surely raises as many questions as it answers.

And that second draft is themewriting--prose meant less to persuade than simply to sound persuasive. Where, for instance, does the writer actually back up her claim that Pip changes yet remains innocent? Nowhere, really. The evidence she offers does not so much support the assertion as repeat it: Pip steals but does so through "a kind-hearted sort of innocence"; he cuts his friends "yet . . . is still an innocent." The points don't add up. The reason why they don't, I think, is that the writer is trying to re-use evidence from her first draft to make a different sort of argument in the second. She has a new Thesis Statement but not really a new argument. A concern with how and when the reader comes to identify with Pip ("Pip is introduced . . . . one no longer feels . . . . one is

made to feel . . . . one can see") runs through and ties together the thinking of her first draft. But she simply drops this concern in her second draft, and replaces it with vague talk about Pip's true character. (Why? Can we perhaps assume that the voice of a teacher has intervened at some point between the two writings?) The result is a revised passage that sounds more authoritative, but no longer has that much of a point to make.

It is, then, the tone of the passage that has changed more than anything else. And that, interestingly enough, has changed for the worse: become more sweeping, aggressive, wordy. No more is Pip "an innocent in some important way," as he was in the first draft. Now he instead "always remains an innocent who never really understands how the world works" (my emphasis). Similarly, Pip no longer merely "steals"; in the second draft he "actually steals something"--and now does this not, as in the first draft, because he is "innocent and good-hearted," but "because he has a gullible, kind-hearted sort of innocence."

This reworking of her piece, then, shows us the writer being socialized, appropriated, as she struggles to take on the voice of the academy--or at least of her teacher. But I'm not sure that such a struggle is always a sign of intellectual broadening or growth--as cognitive theory would seem to suggest. In this

case, as I've tried to show, the narrative of the first draft seems to make more sense than the hierarchical structuring of the second. So if that second draft really is the sort of thing we mean by reader-based prose, then I think we should be careful about what sort of claims we make for it.

Actually, as I suppose is clear by now, I like the way we see the writer in her first draft begin by forming a view of Pip as a likeable innocent, then wrestling with events in the novel that would seem to contradict that view, and finally deciding that even at his most dishonest Pip somehow seems untouched by malice. It reminds me of the sort of talk about books and movies that I often have with my friends and family, and that I imagine she has with hers. The point of such talk is not usually to come to some sort of critical agreement on issues of form or character, but simply to share our various responses to the text--to retell scenes that have stuck in our minds, to recall what we were thinking and feeling as we saw the movie or read the book. Such talk is not egocentric; it simply differs from the kind that goes on in most English classes.

Although it is not so hard, really, to imagine the workings of a class that valued the sort of direct response to a text that we see in that first draft more than the mock Cliff's Notes

styling of the second. The teacher of such a class would be aware, of course, of bucking the tide, of urging her students to avoid what has become a privileged way of talking about books. But that is the point. For what we see occuring in these two passages is a process of acculturation. Whether it is a kind of acculturation that all of us like is still another question. My point, for now, is simply that what we see the writer learning to do here is to shape her prose not for a reader but for a different reader than she wrote to before. She is discovering how to invent (a bawdlerized and routine form of) the university.

The problem is, again, with words like egocentric. The struggling writers Flower discusses are all adults, yet she uses a term that originally described the thinking of young children to talk about their work. The term is dismissive. It implies that such writers have somehow failed to master the rudiments of ordinary adult discourse, that their ideas and writing are still immature, self-focused. (Think of how our view of such writings shifts if, with James Britton, we call them not egocentric but expressive.) Seen as trapped within the limits of a lesser and shallow language, the task such writers face is presumed to be nothing less than the working out of a fuller view of the world and of themselves. The metaphor for learning is one of growth from within, and they are seen as stunted.

But what if the real problem for such writers is more one of how to enter into a discourse whose constraints and phrasings are unfamiliar to them? To ask such a question is itself to enter into the social critique of cognitivist theory. Again, the common view is that a writer must first work out what she has to say and then tailor this message to the needs of her readers. Purpose comes before Audience. But, as David Bartholomae has argued, it is hard to see how a writer can have a purpose outside of a discourse, how she can mean to say something without first being in the sort of situation where such things get said (139). Papers on Great Expectations don't get written by people who just hop out of bed in the morning and decide, for lack of anything else to do, to jot down some ideas that have come to them about the 19th century novel. At least, not usually. Such writings instead arise out of and are formed as part of a prior and ongoing discourse--in this case, that of an English class. And it will be that discourse that will determine, largely, what sorts of things get said and how. So the student writing a paper on Dickens will do well if, in her prose, she is able to suggest a familiarity and ease with the kinds of things people like her teachers talk about when they talk about novels. If not, she will once again wonder, like so many beginning students, what those teachers "really want" from her.

In "The Language of Exclusion," Mike Rose points out how traditional concerns with the mechanics of prose have long been used as a means of barring certain kinds of writing (and thus writers) from the discourse of the university. The reasoning goes something like this: Good writing is the vehicle of clear and precise thinking. But to write well one must first master certain "basics" of form and usage. Therefore, if a writer does not show facility with such forms, then her thinking cannot possibly be sound. She needs to be sent off to bonehead English, to get her flawed language and thought remediated. Until it is, what she says can be ignored.

We ought to take care not to use terms like writer-based and reader-based prose to make similar distinctions, to mistake, however unwittingly, the conventions of academic writing for the processes of thought. Flower's reader-based prose is really another name for a privileged form of discourse: hierarchical in structure, issue-centered, organized around concepts rather than events, and whose transitions and conclusions (but not, alas, always assumptions) are made strongly explicit (172-73). There are, I think, good reasons for teaching our students the workings of such discourse. But one of them is not that it is in some way better or less egocentric than their own. What we need is a way of talking about writing that does not turn into yet another language of exclusion, that does not class many of our students as somehow deficient or inept, but rather lets us connect their discourses to our own.

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